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ABSTRACT

Resulting from a 2-day conference held to discuss the most critical issues facing community colleges, this paper provides summaries of the participants' conclusions regarding finance, access, quality, and technology. The first section reviews the relationship between mission and finance, asserting that proper institutional support includes moving away from funding mechanisms that are primarily enrollment driven and diversifying sources of support to protect against future funding crises. The next section reflects the participants' concerns about access to education, suggesting that community colleges introduce technological improvements, view clients as consumers, search for effective ways to integrate counseling and instruction, and develop leadership for student services. The impact of new technologies on the community colleges is discussed next, focusing on changes in curriculum, classroom activities, costs, and the need to balance organizational benefits against the perceived costs of increased technology use. The next section examines concerns about quality, recommending that greater care be taken in curriculum structuring, that vocational programs adopt more stringent standards, and that reforms emerging in secondary education be noted. Finally, additional themes emerging from the conference related to the community college mission, the need for public assistance, and new relationships with schools of education that research the community college are highlighted. (LAL)

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CRITICAL ISSUES FACING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Community college chief executive officers are often so busy dealing with daily crises that it becomes difficult to step back and take a broader look at long-range issues and problems. Academics from prestigious schools of education, on the other hand, find it relatively easy to criticise the two-year college movement, since they have the luxury of distance from the trenches.

But, when members of both groups are brought together, a melding of the two viewpoints can produce new insights -- and some valuable suggestions for future action.

That was the result when presidents and chancellors from 13 of the nation's largest community college districts recently met with four noted professors of higher education to discuss the most critical issues facing community colleges nationwide: finance, access, quality and technology.*

Following are highlights from the two-day conference, which was sponsored by the League for Innovation in the Community College and hosted by the Los Angeles Community College District.

* The Colloquium on the Critical Issues Facing the Community College was held in Los Angeles, February 9-10, 1984. It was sponsored by the League for Innovation in the Community College and hosted by the Los Angeles Community College District. Besides the authors, in attendance were:

Richard L. Alfred, University of Michigan

Charles J. Carlsen, Johnson County Community College, Kansas

Donald J. Carlyon, Delta College, Michigan

Arthur Cohen, University of California at Los Angeles

Paul Elsner, Maricopa Community Colleges, Arizona

Fred Gaskin, Moraine Valley Community College, Illinois

Donald H. Godbold, Peralta Community College District, California

Richard K. Greenfield, St. Louis Community College, Missouri

Richard H. Hagemeyer, Central Piedmont Community College, North Carolina

R. Jan LeCroy, Dallas County Community College District, Texas

Robert H. McCabe, Miami-Dade Community College, Florida

Terry O'Banion, League for Innovation in the Community College

Richard C. Richardson, Arizona State University

John E. Roueche, University of Texas at Austin

Eldon G. Schafer, Lane Community College, Oregon

Bill F. Stewart, Kirkwood Community College, Iowa

James Young, Kern Community College District, California

CRITICAL ISSUES FACING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Finance

Mission and finance are inextricably bound together. What is not clear, however, is whether mission has been driving finance (as we have assumed in the past) or whether (as we respond to the increasing influence of state houses and the proliferation of governmentally and industrially supported job training programs) funding is determining our mission. Perhaps this serves to point out the precarious condition of the traditional mission as a binding force, nationally, for community colleges, something we will say more about later.

With the prospects for enrollment growth--or growth in student contact hours--looking bleak through the early 1990's, proper support for our institutions suggests that we move away from funding mechanisms that are primarily enrollment driven. In their place are required systems that provide not only adequate support for required functions, but also increasing sums for the maintenance and in some cases replacement of facilities approaching the end of their useful lives. Doing this may require that we drop contentions used in the past which emphasize the low unit cost of community college education in favor of cost effectiveness arguments. This will require, more than ever, that we be able to demonstrate effectiveness, especially relative to competing proprietary institutions and state colleges and universities.

To protect against future funding crises, many districts are diversifying their sources of support. They seek federal, state and local funding, and many are making a concerted effort to build relationships with the private sector that will be ongoing in nature. How successful these efforts will be is not yet clear. What their long term effects will be where successful are matters for serious consideration.

Access

Throughout the history of 2-year colleges, one area of fluctuating emphasis has been access. We now appear to be more concerned about quality, but can a return to the access issue be far away? Two observations strongly suggest that we are at the eve of renewed concern about access. First, with all respect to the K-12 reform movement, experts on literacy indicate that quick fixes for this nation's reading and writing problems are not in the offing. If literacy is to be a national priority, then the community college will continue to be the place where many young Americans obtain basic skills. Second, the current expansion of computer technology is likely to create a similarly divided citizenry: those with basic computer skills and able to deal successfully in a high technology economy, and those without. Here, too, the community college seems to be located at the critical place in the structure of American education. Access to a community college may prove essential for very large numbers of people wishing to fully participate in the economic (to say nothing of the cultural and civic) life of this society.

We are not, in general, ready for an emphasis on access. Through the hard financial times of the last decade, our student services functions have absorbed a disproportionate amount of the retrenchment. In many cases

the entry testing that will help make programs more effective for students is still receiving major institutional resistance; counseling services have become isolated from the instructional program and in many instances may have moved excessively into the realm of personal as opposed to vocational or academic counseling; registration processes remain in many cases complex and not as "user friendly" as modern systems can and ought to be; and in general our financial aids, child care and other support services are not what they have been at other times in our past.

To meet these shortcomings we have a number of opportunities to exploit. First, we can turn to our systems and introduce improvements permitted by the march of technology. This no longer requires major developmental efforts as many highly successful registration and counseling assistance systems are easily available. Second, we can borrow the perspective--well developed by industry--that views our clients as consumers--as customers. A review of the techniques that the private sector has developed to make their employees sensitive to the needs and desires of the customer may offer powerful suggestions that will enhance our performance. Third, we can intensify our search for effective ways to integrate counseling and instruction. Fourth, and perhaps most difficult, we need to develop leadership for student services as we have not traditionally. Most chief executives are not as familiar with student services as they are with other campus functions, and most administrators in charge of student services do not become chief executives. Leadership development efforts are in order that will alter these patterns. The time is coming for a major examination into the health and prospects for student services as an essential part of the access issue.

Technology

From an instructional standpoint, high technology is having an impact on the community college in two ways. First, it is forcing us to alter the curriculum, in some cases to add whole new programs. Second, technology is changing classroom activity across the curriculum, changing the way teachers do business; technological advances, for example, clearly represent our best bet for providing individualized instruction.

As we make accommodation in the curriculum for the revolution that is already underway in the workplace we are confronted with a number of very serious problems. The first is the sheer cost of introducing some of these programs where very specialized facilities and sophisticated equipment is mandatory. In times when many districts are having trouble maintaining existing operating budgets, the burden of some of these expensive new programs is difficult to manage indeed. Furthermore, many of these programs experience high turnover of equipment, with major new innovations taking place in hardware and procedures on a constant basis. Maintaining currency in these fields requires expenditures on an ongoing basis.

The impact of these initial and ongoing expenses on the balance between the liberal arts and vocational studies in any particular community college is a matter of the upmost gravity, and one which should be monitored with great dispassion by collegiate leadership. Of similar concern is the placement in the collegiate structure of the special job training programs that typically accompany high technology curriculum. This issue can have a tremendous long term impact on an institution and deserves very deliberate attention.

With regard to the introduction of instructional technology into the pedogogical portfolios of the teaching staff we have another imposing list of concerns. A particularly intriguing item on that list is the recognition that classroom technology typically does not enhance efficiency, but does increase effectiveness. Perhaps in the years to come we can seek efficiency increases, but for the immediate future we are well advised to proceed with our attention on effectiveness gains. Where major investments in facilities or instructional equipment are concerned, some colleges may wish to time their commitment with care. While timing is a tricky business, a move of this nature would best be activated when a new generation of technology is introduced. This would permit the longest effective life of a generation of technology and maximum return on staff training and other investments.

Providing proper opportunities and incentives for faculty to become adequately versed, on an ongoing basis, with technological advances is a tremendous challenge. This will especially be the case in institutions with a high proportion of older faculty in programs that can benefit from the introduction of technology.

We should also note that the introduction of management technology in our institutions has effects on operations. The implementation of advanced data processing systems has, for instance, made possible greater centralization of decision making. Many feel that this same technology has depersonalized many institutional transactions. Balancing the desired organizational benefits of technology against its perceived costs is another dilemma that college leaders must confront.

Quality

The quality revolution is continuing, and to listen to some thoughtful observers, this is a matter of the highest concern. The overall design--and if not design, appearance--of the community college curriculum still warrants words of caution from some quarters. The accumulation of programs and practices over the years have brought us to a state where there is great unevenness across institutions. Grading practices, course and program approval processes, faculty evaluation systems, staff development programs--many of these are long overdue for review and update with an emphasis on maintaining, or in some cases returning to standards that have been basic to higher education.

Of particular concern is the overall mix of offerings in our institutions. Some colleges have greatly reduced their emphasis on the liberal arts over time. This has not necessarily resulted from a conscious plan, but rather reflects the effects of responding to various local needs over an extended period. To the degree that an institution moves away from the core material of higher education, it runs the risk, we are warned, of moving to the periphery of the American education system. That is, the community college will look more like the proprietary or extension school, and less like the full-fledged members of higher education that we are used to being, with all the consequences with respect to public support that these perceptions imply.

Several suggestions have appeared that are likely to be of help when moving toward more rigorous standards. One is to take greater care in structuring the curriculum. Developmental efforts (aimed at preparing students for college work) might be clearly separated from remedial work

(designed to impart the skills that should have been acquired in secondary school). The clearly credit part of the curriculum (the transfer and vocational/technical programs) might benefit from clear separation from the non-credit and community education programs. Each of these major instructional components may quite appropriately have different course content requirements, teacher credentialing requirements, grading practices, and so forth. What is important is that the standards for each component be consciously determined and not allowed to impact unfavorably on another component.

We might also note the practices of some of our more stringent vocational programs. Typically these programs have six features that help assure quality. The curriculum is designed as a conscious sequence of courses that take the student to a significant learning objective. The prerequisite structure for more advanced courses is clear and enforced. Faculty are required to maintain currency in their field on a regular basis. Students are required to demonstrate mastery of required basic skills before being admitted to a program. Students are required to demonstrate mastery of a knowledge and skill base before graduating from a program. And academic leadership is expected and provided for in the program's structure.

Another suggestion is to note some of the reforms emerging in secondary education. In many cases these have direct transference to the community college. In other cases they suggest approaches we might take. One example is the clear specification for students of stringent requirements of a course (e.g., the amount of reading and writing required) and then the holding to these requirements. To the degree that secondary school reforms are successful, they will be putting pressures for enhanced quality on the community college curriculum.

Some Overarching Concerns

When trying to grasp the essential issues facing the community college one is faced with real taxonomic dilemmas. As is evident above, the issues associated with quality effect access, technology changes can impact upon quality and access, and so forth. What is more, issues that are urgent in some settings are not in others: it is becoming increasingly difficult to generalize when talking about this nation's community colleges.

But through all of this complexity and diversity we can draw some useful themes. First, we must come to grips with the state of the community college mission. We must determine if, across this nation, we continue to have shared concerns that will provide the substantive foundation for a cohesive "movement". The practitioner community simply must spend time together debating this matter until a reasonable consensus is in hand.

Second, we must seek assistance in bringing our message to the public and to those in positions of supplying the resources we so desperately need. Our credibility as educators will be enhanced if we can find spokespersons in the private sector and various levels of government, people who are convinced of the value of our enterprise through first hand knowledge. We've beat our own drum for too long and we are likely to be more effective in obtaining increased public support if some of those who have benefitted from our works vouch for our effectiveness.

Third, we need to embark on a new relationship with the schools of education that research the community college and help educate our leaders. We need research on our terms, not the university's. That is, the practitioner community needs to become more involved in directing the research community to the problems that would benefit from rigorous investigation.

At the same time, our institutions must become more willing to provide investigators with access to high quality information about our operations.

It is time for the leadership training programs in our universities to toughen up. Community colleges will be better served to have fewer, but better, recipients of advanced degrees such that we can feel assured that those who seek the senior posts in our profession can stand comfortably with doctoral people from the best disciplinary and professional programs.

We hope that the discussion above conveys the critical issues facing the community college as seen by a nationwide sample of leaders. None of these matters are associated with easy solutions. Some of them are not new. All of them are serious. Our colloquium did not provide adequate time to reach a consensus on a course of action. There was, however, complete agreement that seriousness is the requirement of the day. The community college as a segment of American higher education has moved into adulthood. The problems associated with growth have given way to matters of sustenance and renewal. It is now necessary for community colleges to recognize and accept maturity and move to address the critical issues which we face in a forthright manner.

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